

Development community

This section describes how actions at the site level, primarily by the development community, can support the implementation of GO TO 2040. This includes developers, and also architects, landscape architects, realtors, financial institutions, and others that are involved in development from the private sector. It uses case studies and best practices from around the region, with links to CMAP web pages that have further information on these topics and more examples of case studies and best practices. The contents of this section are not regulatory in nature, and are not meant to limit the actions of developers; instead, they are meant to provide positive examples of how developers can support GO TO 2040 through their actions.

How Decisions at the Site Level Affect Plan Implementation

Much of the built environment in the region is the product of incremental decisions made at individual sites over many years. Private enterprise drives this system, but it is shaped by local government land use controls, such as zoning, as well as a complex mix of policies at other levels of government.

Developers and architects have produced some breathtaking results at the site level, such as the skyscrapers in downtown Chicago. When repeated across larger areas, private undertakings at the site level can emerge into recognizable and lauded districts, such as the Bungalow Belt in parts of Chicago and some inner ring suburbs. On the other hand, development subdivision by subdivision has not always led to livable communities. Many suburbs that originated as residential subdivisions in the post-war years are now working to change their built environment by creating downtown areas as mixed use, walkable centers. This points to the great need for comprehensive planning by local governments, which addresses site-specific development.

Livable Communities

While GO TO 2040 directs many actions to support livable communities toward local governments, developers actually build the homes we live in and the commercial buildings where we work and shop.

They secure sites, draw up plans, obtain financing, shepherd projects through permit review, oversee construction, market the finished product, and shoulder much of the overall risk. To support GO TO 2040, developers can help by building the communities that reflect the principles of livability.

Land Use and Housing

GO TO 2040 emphasizes mixed use development at a density somewhat higher than recent trends. The marketability of denser development will differ between communities, and different communities will have varying definitions of “denser” development; in general, density increases site yield and in many cases reduces per-unit site development costs for developers. The commercial space in mixed-use development can also help create vibrancy at the street level and provide amenities attractive to potential buyers. In turn, increased residential densities are needed to support the new commercial uses in mixed-use developments. A number of barriers to mixed-use development also need to be recognized, such as the effect of location on the viability of commercial spaces, market potential, and the lingering difficulty in securing financing to construct mixed use buildings. Thus, it is important for local planning to take market realities into account.

One of the most important actions developers can take to implement GO TO 2040 is to seek projects in already developed areas. Most residential and commercial development in recent years has been on greenfield sites, yet there are extensive opportunities for profitable development in existing communities across the region. Infill can be a challenging form of development because of physical constraints and the presence of numerous landowners. It often works best in partnership with municipalities, which can help to assemble land, secure gap financing, or alter zoning.

Such development is sometimes complicated by the potential for contamination on site, either perceived or real. Remediation of these brownfields may be needed prior to redevelopment. While developers and lenders may be concerned about the possibility of being caught up in a liability action over harm from contamination, there are state and federal programs to reduce exposure to liability and provide financial incentives for remediation. Fortunately, there are many examples of successful redevelopment projects on brownfield sites in the region.



The \$100 million Westin North Shore, with more than 400 rooms, was built in Wheeling by the consortium Harp Midco Wheeling LLC, a venture by the Village of Wheeling, Mid-America Development Partners, and the Oak Brook-based Harp Group. The site had some contamination from its previous uses, including a horse stable, vacant land, used car lot, and Wonder/Hostess outlet. Image courtesy of Alan Light



Numerous transit oriented developments have been built around CTA and Metra train stations in the City of Evanston. These projects have reinvested in existing developed areas, and support the use of transit. Image courtesy of Dorothy Perry

Transit oriented development (TOD) is a denser form of development that, as the name suggests, is anchored by some form of public transportation, typically a train line. The purpose of TOD is to focus housing and commercial development close to transit infrastructure, thereby providing an alternative to using the automobile, although denser development combined with good urban design also promotes walking and bicycle trips. TOD has become much more common in the region in recent years, although many untapped opportunities remain for developers to propose transit oriented projects.

GO TO 2040 aims for a balanced supply of housing throughout the region. While local regulations and incentive programs will help achieve this balance, for-profit developers can aid in meeting the goal by seeking projects at a variety of price points. One of the most important approaches is to mix affordable housing within developments, using good design to give proposed affordable housing an attractive appearance and guarding against the perception that affordable housing causes a concentration of poverty and crime. Local regulatory barriers can stand in the way of balanced housing objectives, but developers may take advantage of options to build affordable units, such as density bonuses.

Nonprofit developers play a very important role in providing balanced housing. They often are partners in housing preservation programs, which work to protect the quality or the affordability of existing housing stock. Nonprofit developers also construct new affordable housing as well. Many are community based organizations that work within a designated area to serve residents of that area, utilizing financing from many sources to provide good housing options for those who would not otherwise be able to afford them. Nonprofit developers also build in disinvested places where the value of a new building would be less than its construction cost. In so doing, they help to rebuild communities so that they can thrive again.

High-quality design is one of the main ingredients in a livable community. While the overall urban fabric at the block and neighborhood scales should be shaped by local planning, the individual site or lot is still the building block of good urban design. Design review and published design guidelines can be used at the local level to help ensure quality developments, but it is the developer and the architect who play the most significant role in site layout, building details, and other aspects.

The fit of a building with its context is perhaps one of the most important elements of urban design. Building style, massing, height and other factors determine whether a new building fits within its historic context. This is an important consideration in every community, and welcoming new buildings needs to be balanced with historic preservation. Because people value the preservation of historic building stock, developers can realize a marketable project, such as an adaptive reuse of a historic building, while also taking advantage of tax incentives available to rehabilitate historic properties.



News that the owner of the Walden Oaks apartment complex in Woodstock had plans to sell the property caused fear that the property would be turned completely into market-rate housing and lose its affordability due to market pressures. Hispanic Housing Development Corporation, a nonprofit housing developer, purchased the property and turned it into a mixed-income project, reserving 125 units for seniors and 25 units for low-income families, with the remaining 42 units market-rate. Image courtesy of Flickr user Dave Hallberg



HomeTown Aurora is a 1,288-unit development built by Bigelow Homes that includes single-family detached, single-family attached, and loft-style homes. About half of the units are affordable to families earning below 80 percent of the area median income. It includes diverse housing types that appeal to a range of market segments. This compact development also combines smaller private lots with protected open space. Image courtesy of Bigelow Homes

Resource Conservation

GO TO 2040 recommends a number of actions that can be taken to conserve energy and manage water resources sustainably. Most of the actions are targeted toward local governments, but developers and property owners play a crucial role, as innovative energy and water conservation measures in buildings that go beyond regulatory requirements are the decision of the developer.

A number of programs are available to help reduce energy use at the site level. For example, builders can participate in the Energy Star program for new construction, a program in which the builder forms a partnership with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) to develop homes which meet energy efficiency guidelines. The home then earns an Energy Star label, which the builder can market for its lower cost of ownership and environment-friendliness. Developers can also seek certification under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) or use guidelines of the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) Green program.

Existing buildings also provide many opportunities to reduce energy use. Retrofitting lighting systems, HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning), windows, and other building components can present major savings for occupants, both in commercial and residential buildings. Many programs are available through electric and gas utilities, the state, and others to provide incentives to undertake such work. Many best management practices to conserve water are also instituted at the site level, such as high efficiency household appliances and fixtures. Buildings can even be designed so that they harvest rainwater or use graywater for non-potable uses.

Wastewater treatment systems are sometimes installed to serve individual sites and may be financed at least partly by developers, giving them a role in wastewater treatment to protect water resources. Developers can seek to have their developments served by the best wastewater treatment technology available, and development sites in some areas can be designed so that reclaimed wastewater can be used for beneficial purposes rather than being discharged into a waterway. Other ways developers can protect water resources are to include effective stormwater best management practices in their developments. Some measures will be required in local ordinances, but the effective use of best management practices to reduce runoff volume and improve water quality depends strongly on a developer's commitment to using them.



The Buckingham Building in the Chicago Loop was built in 1929. After its heyday it saw years of vacancy before being redeveloped, starting in 2007, to serve as student housing for Chicago's Columbia College. The building is on the National Register of Historic Places, and the redevelopment project won a Preservation Excellence Award from the City of Chicago in 2008. It is owned by private investors and managed by U.S. Equities. Image courtesy of Flickr user Zol87



The Ford Motor Company Stamping Plant in Chicago Heights retrofitted its lighting systems with the help of the ComEd Smart Ideas incentive program. Ford replaced more than 1,000 lighting fixtures with high performance, energy efficient models that use 50 percent less energy than the old fixtures and have a longer life. Ford also installed sensors to turn off lights when personnel were not using the room. Image courtesy of ComEd

Open Space

GO TO 2040 addresses the protection of both recreation-oriented parks and conservation-oriented preserves. While park districts and county forest preserves should continue to play the leading role in providing parks and preserves, the private sector has an important and growing role.

For instance, conservation design can be used at the level of individual development sites. Conservation design typically involves permanently preserving part of a development site, clustering homes and decreasing the size of private lots to maintain full density. The open space is worked into the site design, generally with a trail network, and developers frequently realize a premium on home sales because potential buyers value the proximity of open space. In some cases developers may work with land trusts to manage the protected open space associated with a conservation subdivision.

GO TO 2040 recommends commitment to conservation design in areas with valuable natural features, but it can be an important approach in other areas. It is also important to try to include recreational open space or parks in development and redevelopment sites. This can be a significant way of meeting standards for park accessibility.



The Sanctuary of Bull Valley is a 200-acre conservation subdivision in central McHenry County developed by Jack Porter and Associates. It includes a long-term restoration plan for the deed-restricted open space. Image courtesy of Jack Porter and Associates

Regional Mobility

While regional and state agencies play the greatest role in increasing regional mobility, developers can also play a part in supporting a strong regional transportation system. In general, support for alternative transportation modes, including transit, walking, and biking, furthers the implementation of GO TO 2040.

Alternative transportation can be supported on a site-by-site basis in a number of ways. Most basically, developers can include sidewalks within their developments; a walkable community is a basic precondition for transit. Larger developments can also benefit from internal bicycle facilities, whether on-street striped lanes or off-street trails.

Further, developers can seek to connect their internal networks of pedestrian and bicycle facilities to larger, external networks. This will likely involve working with the local municipality, county, park district, or forest preserve district, depending on the development's location. Coordinating to create these external connections can make internal sidewalks and bike trails part of a larger, regional system and can ensure continuity.

Finally, developers can seek projects within already developed areas near existing transit services as a primary way of supporting GO TO 2040. This takes advantage of existing infrastructure and is far more efficient than extending transit infrastructure to serve new locations.